

BREAKING THE LAST TABOO

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By James A. Haught

Few Americans know that Thomas Jefferson wrote, in a letter to John Adams:

"The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

Or that Albert Einstein wrote in The New York Times in 1930:

"I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes the objects of his creation, whose purposes are modeled after our own -- a God, in short, who is but a reflection of human frailty. Neither can I believe that the individual survives the death of his body, although feeble souls harbor such thoughts through fear or ridiculous egotism."

Or that Mark Twain wrote in his journal:

"I cannot see how a man of any large degree of humorous perception can ever be religious -- unless he purposely shut the eyes of his mind & keep them shut by force."

Or that Emily Bronte wrote in 1846:

"Vain are the thousand creeds that move men's hearts, unutterably vain, worthless as wither'd weeds."

Or that Sigmund Freud wrote, in a letter to a friend:

"Neither in my private life nor in my writings, have I ever made a secret of being an out-and-out unbeliever."

Or that Thomas Paine wrote in The Age of Reason:

"All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."

Or that Thomas Edison told The New York Times in 1910:

"I cannot believe in the immortality of the soul.... No, all this talk of an existence for us, as individuals, beyond the grave is wrong. It is born of our tenacity of life -- our desire to go on living -- our dread of coming to an end."

Or that Voltaire wrote, in a letter to Frederick the Great:

"Christianity is the most ridiculous, the most absurd, and bloody religion that has ever infected the world."

Or that Beethoven shunned religion and scorned the clergy.

Or that Abraham Lincoln never joined a church, and once wrote a skeptical treatise, which friends burned in a stove, to save him from wrecking his political career.

Or that the motto of Margaret Sanger's birth-control newsletter was: "No gods, no masters."

Or that Clarence Darrow said, in a 1930 speech in Toronto:

"I don't believe in God because I don't believe in Mother Goose."

Or that President William Howard Taft said, in a letter declining the presidency of Yale University:

"I do not believe in the divinity of Christ, and there are many other of the postulates of the orthodox creed to which I cannot subscribe."

Or that Luther Burbank told a newspaper interviewer in 1926:

"As a scientist, I cannot help feeling that all religions are on a tottering foundation.... I am an infidel today. I do not believe what has been served to me to believe. I am a doubter, a questioner, a skeptic. When it can be proved to me that there is immortality, that there is resurrection beyond the gates of death, then I will believe. Until then, no."

Or that Bertrand Russell wrote in 1930:

"My own view of religion is that of Lucretius. I regard it as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race."

Or that George Bernard Shaw wrote, in the preface to one of his plays:

"At present there is not a single credible established religion in the world."

Or that Leo Tolstoy wrote, in response to his excommunication by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church:

"To regard Christ as God, and to pray to him, are to my mind the greatest possible sacrilege."

Or that Charles Darwin said:

"The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us, and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic."

Or that Kurt Vonnegut said:

"Say what you will about the sweet miracle of unquestioning faith, I consider a capacity for it terrifying and absolutely vile."

Or that Gloria Steinem said:

"By the year 2000, we will, I hope, raise our children to believe in human potential, not God."

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Many, perhaps most, of the world's outstanding thinkers, scientists, writers, reformers - people who changed Western life - have been religious skeptics. But this fact is little known in America. Why?

Because our nation has one last taboo, one unmentionable topic: religious doubt.

In the daily tumult, it's permissible to challenge any idea, save one. Supernatural religion - invisible gods and devils, heavens and hells - is off limits. It's acceptable to write that Elvis is alive on a UFO, but not that God is a figment of the imagination. A few "freethought" journals do so, but mainstream media mostly stay mum.

There's an unspoken consensus that the subject is too touchy, that it's "impolite" to question anyone's religion. In a nation of 100 million church members, with an upsurge of fundamentalism, too many feelings would be hurt.

Why are some believers angered by disbelief? Bertrand Russell offered this explanation:

"There is something feeble and a little contemptible about a man who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths. Almost inevitably, some part of him is aware that they are myths, and that he believes them only because they are comforting. But he dares not face this thought! Moreover, since he is aware, however dimly, that his opinions are not rational, he becomes furious when they are disputed."

Maybe that's the reason why, for many centuries, you could be killed for doubting dogmas. Believers killing non-believers was a pattern long before the Ayatollah Khomeini ordered a holy hit on Salman Rushdie. For example:

In the fifth century B.C., the Greek teacher Protagoras wrote:

"As to the gods, I have no way of knowing either that they exist or do not exist, or what they are like."

Protagoras was charged with impiety, as were other Greek thinkers. Unlike Socrates and Anaxagoras, who were sentenced to death, Protagoras merely was banished from Athens, and his books were burned. As he sailed into exile, he drowned.

In the year 415, the woman scientist Hypatia, head of the legendary Alexandria library, was beaten to death by Christian monks who considered her a pagan. The leader of the monks, Cyril, was canonized a saint.

In the 11th century, Omar Khayyam wrote his exquisite Persian verses on the futility of trying to discern any purpose of life. He scoffed at believers yearning for heaven - "Fools, your reward is neither here nor there" - and belittled divine prophecies:

"The revelations of the devout and learn'd / Who rose before us and as prophets burn'd / Are all but stories, which, awoke from sleep / They told their comrades, and to sleep return'd."

How did Omar escape execution in the Muslim world, which is known for beheading "blasphemers"? Actually, Omar is a mystery, and the verses attributed to him didn't begin surfacing until two centuries after his death.

In the 1500s, Michel de Montaigne, who created the essay as a literary form, wrote comments such as:

"Man is certainly stark mad: he cannot make a worm, yet he will make gods by the dozen."

Although Montaigne lived at a time when "heretics" were burned, he eluded prosecution. Other thinkers weren't so lucky. In 1553, the physician Michael Servetus, who discovered the pulmonary circulation of blood, was burned alive in John Calvin's Geneva for doubting the Trinity. (In my Unitarian church, the youth group holds a yearly "Michael Servetus wiener roast" in his memory.)

In 1600, the philosopher Giordano Bruno was burned for teaching that the earth circles the sun, and that the universe is infinite. He was among thousands of Inquisition victims.

Later in the 1600s, the Englishman Thomas Hobbes, generally deemed the first major thinker in what is now called the Age of Reason, wrote:

"Opinion of ghosts, ignorance of second causes, devotion to what men fear, and taking of things casual for prognostics, consisteth the natural seeds of religion."

A bishop accused Hobbes of atheism. Parliament ordered an investigation. Hobbes hastily burned his manuscripts, and escaped with only a ban against future writings.

Baruch Spinoza, a Jew in Amsterdam, doubted theological dogmas and wrote lines such as:

"Popular religion may be summed up as a respect for ecclesiastics."

He was excommunicated by the Dutch synagogue, and lived as a semi-outcast.

Gradually, the iron fist of religion lost its grip in the West, and disbelief became a bit safer. But there were relapses. For example, a French teen-ager was beheaded and burned in 1766 for marring a crucifix, singing irreverent songs and wearing his hat while a church procession passed. Voltaire tried to save him, but the clergy demanded death, and the French parliament decreed it.

And Denis Diderot, creator of the first encyclopedia, was jailed for skepticism, and his writings burned. And English publishers who printed Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* were jailed for blasphemy.

Despite the risks, thinkers kept on questioning, and the right to doubt gradually was established - in the West, but not in the Muslim world, where "blasphemers" still face death today.

Although the right was won, it remains partly muzzled in America. What schoolchild is taught that Thomas Jefferson wrote many sneers at "priestcraft" - that he was denounced as a "howling atheist" - and that his famous vow of "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man," which is engraved in his memorial in Washington, was written of the clergy?

What student hears scientific explanations of religion, such as this one: Sigmund Freud said the widespread belief in a father-god arises from psychology. Each tiny child is awed by his or her father as a seemingly all-powerful protector and punisher. As maturity comes, the real father grows less awesome. But the infantile image remains hidden in the subconscious, and becomes attached to an omnipotent, magical father in an invisible heaven. Unknowingly, Freud said, believers worship the long-forgotten toddler impression of the biological father, "clothed in the grandeur in which he once appeared to the small child."

Although open agnosticism is a no-no in America - and although fundamentalism is booming - supernatural religion is fading among educated people. America's mainline Protestant churches, formerly the domain of the elite, have lost millions of members since the 1960s. Intelligent people don't take miracles seriously, and realize there's no evidence of a spirit realm.

The old church "thou shalt nots" against sex, liquor, gambling, birth control, dancing, Sunday shopping, etc., have subsided in our lifetime. Fundamentalism may be rising, but so is secularism. Educated Americans are becoming like Europeans, who have mostly abandoned religion. In England, for example, only a tiny fringe attends church today.

Soon it may be acceptable to challenge the supernatural, as so many great figures have done. The tacit code of silence - the last taboo - may be near an end. I certainly hope so.

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